

Archived Information

Interim Evaluation of the WestEd Regional Educational Laboratory

I. Brief Overview of Laboratory

WestEd was established in 1995 and unites Far West and Southwest Regional Laboratories. The two original educational Laboratories were created by Congress in 1966.

WestEd's mission is to:

Challenge and enable educators to provide quality learning for all students by applying the best available knowledge from research, development and experience. In carrying out its mission, WestEd works with clients to develop the tools, processes and materials that policymakers and practitioners need to put the components of reform together and to scale up successful practice in ways that will improve teaching and learning for a broader range of students. (US Department of Education, *Profiles of the Regional Educational Laboratories*, 1998.)

WestEd's intent is to use the best research-based knowledge and tools, build on what it knows about schools improvement, respond to regional needs and focus on regional, state, district, school, and classroom reforms (WestEd's briefing book for *Interim evaluation of the Regional Educational Laboratories*, 1999.) WestEd serves four western regions: Arizona, California, Nevada, and Utah.

WestEd is involved in a variety of initiatives to support systemic improvement. These activities include: Whole school reform, Language and Cultural Diversity, and State Alliance Projects. WestEd's priority areas are: Assessment, language and cultural diversity, early childhood education, and technology (WestEd's briefing book for *Interim evaluation of the Regional Educational Laboratories*, 1999). WestEd's current R&D in schools and communities includes: Western Assessment Collaborative, Career Preparation Assessment, Talent

Development Model, and Comprehensive School Reform (WestEd's briefing book for *Interim evaluation of the Regional Educational Laboratories*, 1999).

WestEd Revenue is from the following sources: State funded contracts 22%; U.S. Department of Education 24 percent; other federal contracts 11 percent; Fiscal contracts 25 percent; other agencies 18 percent.

Overview of Activities

The WestEd peer-evaluation was conducted at the Laboratory headquarter in San Francisco from Monday, April 12 to Friday, April 16, 1999. I received the reading materials for the evaluation two weeks prior to the meeting and reviewed all the materials that were selected for this review. WestEd arranged several presentation sessions to help the review team to gain more knowledge about their activities and on the current status of the projects. Presentations were professionally conducted and were extremely informative. In addition to reading the materials, I participated in the presentations and I asked questions and had interaction with the WestEd research team. I also met with the Governing Board members as well as with the Institutional Liaison, with the clients, and with the partners on several occasions. These meetings provided excellent opportunity to gain insight into WestEd's operation, service, and clients' level of satisfaction with WestEd's performance. I have also had occasional opportunities to interact with the individual staff members of WestEd to talk about their scope of work, their interests, and their background. The following report is based on what I have learned from the sources mentioned above. It must be indicated in advance, however, that my report has several limitations. First, it is based on the limited reading materials that I had a chance to review and does not reflect the broadness and the true range of the materials that WestEd has produced

and activities that WestEd is currently undertaking. Second, the time for this review was limited. WestEd has done extensive and quality works that deserves much more attention that what I can devote during this limited visit and on my limited amount of time on this evaluation.

II. Implementation and Management

A. To what extent is the REL doing what they were approved to do during their first three contract years?

Strengths

To present a comprehensive picture in this section, I will start with WestEd's proposed activities. In response to OERI's RFP, WestEd proposed to perform seven tasks. Following is a brief description of these tasks along with the proposed budget (see, Western Educational Regional Laboratory, *Technical Proposal*, 1999).

Task 1. (\$625,000) Laboratory Management. Based on the materials that I reviewed and based on my observation during the evaluation period, WestEd perform above expectations in this area. The Governing Board is strong and consists of knowledgeable members with the relevant background. The Chief Executive Officer is very knowledgeable and is in control of the Laboratory. Staff members (research staff and assistants) seemed to be interested and involved.

Task 2. (\$1,204,996) Development and applied research. WestEd proposed several projects in this part. These projects include:

- (1) Whole school reform. In this section, WestEd proposes three strategies: (a) *the implementation and adaptation of Johns Hopkins University's models, Success for all (reading)*, (b) *Roots and Wings (other disciplines) in the region*; and (c) Co-development of Johns Hopkins newly conceived model of middle school reform known as *Talent Development Schools*; and initial development of school-support strategy known as the *Western Assessment Collaborative*. Based on the documents that I reviewed, and based on the discussions with the administrative and research staff members of WestEd, it appears that due to different sets of constraints, some of

these projects did not continue and the allocated resources for these projects were reassigned to other WestEd projects. An example of this is *the implementation and adaptation of Johns Hopkins University's models, Success for All* (reading) and *Roots and Wings* (other disciplines).

- (2) Language and cultural diversity. The plan for this part of the proposed work was to enhance the systemic and collaborative capacity of teachers, school systems and communities to reshape school structure and culture to equitably serve the increasingly diverse students. This part was a very important part of task 2 and as indicated earlier, the issue of language and cultural diversity was one of the main focuses of the mission of WestEd. Even though, there are several different projects that are planned to be conducted in the near future, currently, there are few studies that are specifically targeted to the issues on assessment and instruction for linguistically and culturally diverse students. Of particular importance in this area is research on the assessment and instruction of students with limited English proficiency. For example, one of the major issues in the assessment of LEP is inclusion of students with limited English proficiency. Accommodations have been offered to increase the inclusion of LEP students. A major concern in this area is the validity of accommodations. That is, to what extent accommodation strategies that are used in the assessment of students with limited English proficiency affect the construct under measurement. WestEd may initiate a series of experimentally controlled studies to examine issues related to the assessment of Students with limited English proficiency in large-scale assessments. Another area that WestEd can pioneer research is on the validity of classification of LEP and the issues concerning the psychometric characteristics of standardized language proficiency and achievement tests for students with limited English proficiency.

The discussions and recommendations related to students with limited English proficiency that are presented above are based on my review of selected WestEd documents, including the following:

Educating Limited-English proficient students: A review of the research on school programs and classroom practices (Cuevas, 1996)

Briefing session: English language acquisition and California's Proposition 227 Experience (WestEd, 1999)

Bridging cultures between home and school: A guide (Trumbull, 1998)

Culturally responsive mathematics and science education for Native students (Nelson-Barber & Trumbull, 1995)

Guide to developing equitable performance assessment (Koelsch, et al., 1995)

As evident from the above citations, the date of publication for most of these papers is relatively old and may not have been done under the current budget period. My

statements/recommendations in this section are also based on the presentations by WestEd staff and testimony of WestEd staff and clients.

- (3) Early intervention, care and education to integrate the education community with other social service agencies, private organizations, community groups, and family members in planning and conducting comprehensive services for at-risk families. In this area, WestEd has done sufficient work. There are many papers on this topic that WestEd published prior to this recent grant cycle (see *WestEd resource catalog*, 1999). Among the most recent work by WestEd in the area is the project called *Case study of Marin City Families First*. A presentation was given by two WestEd's clients who actually used this service. The presentations were very strong suggesting that the program has been very effective in helping families to have a more stable and productive life patterns which create a positive environment for young children.

Task 3. (\$2,615,005) Services to the Field. This task consists of two broad strategies: an Information Resource System and Direct Assistance. The Information Resource System seeks to make the best knowledge from research and practice readily accessible to a broad range of education constituents. Direct Assistance comes in two forms, Practitioner Assistance that seeks to build client capacity, and Assistance to Policymakers. This task reflects WestEd's belief that sound coherent policies at all levels are essential to the success of systemic reform.

Evidence indicates that WestEd's performance is quite satisfactory in this area. WestEd's reports and publications and our interviews with the clients from different states and different district are all indicative of efficacy and efficiency of WestEd in providing services to the field.

Task 4. (\$360,000) Regional Infrastructure Development. This work was proposed to be accomplished in three phases: (a) Collaborate with other Laboratories, service providers and OERI to address national issues; (b) work with regional programs to advance and strengthen system operations within the four states, and (c) serve the nationwide system through continuous, collaborative R & D on the processes required for using information and assistance to advance school reform.

The evidence indicates that WestEd has collaboration and interaction with other Laboratories and with OERI. The OERI project officer is in contact with WestEd. The project officer monitors all the activities and changes and has continuous dialogue with the WestEd directors and project staff.

In terms of helping the four states under WestEd's regional responsibility, this organization offers excellent support to the states with a minor exception. There has been some contact with Utah, however, not at the level of the other three states. State Alliance Projects are conducted to develop and support state consortia to work together on high priority state education improvement initiatives.

A good example of helping states with their agenda is the *Nevada State Strategy program*. I have reviewed the material under signature program for the work in Nevada. I have also had several occasions to interact with the Nevada State Education Office representatives. They all spoke very highly of the program and they all indicated that the program has been a great success. My personal views on this based on the materials that I reviewed are consistent with those of Nevada State officials.

Another example is the program called *Western Assessment Collaborative* (WAC) which focuses on supporting schools and districts in standards-based reform.

Task 5. (\$403,861) Laboratory Network Program to design an approach to collaboration which builds on and strengthens the efforts of the past few years.

WestEd has established relationship with other RELs in the nation. It also has created *Policy Website* to increase use of the web for information dissemination. WestEd home page provide a wide variety of information including topics on accountability, Charter Schools, News, Resource Directory and Links, and State Information and Contacts. The evidence suggests that

WestEd performing well in this area.

Task 6. (\$188,000) Assistance to OERI in the areas of support of educational reform, attainment of the National Goals, enhancement of OERI's research, development, demonstration and dissemination system and the capacities of the Laboratories.

WestEd has conducted research and activities in consultation with the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI). OERI project officer has been in contact regularly with the WestEd's directors and project staff.

Further, WestEd has sponsored conferences and meetings, has convened expert panels, and has conducted briefings.

Task 7. (485,000) Specialty Area Development. In this section, three areas of national leadership are proposed: (1) Assessment and accountability. (2) Urban education which can draw upon significant urban reform efforts in the region, such as NSF's urban systemic initiatives, and the Annenberg consortia in Los Angeles and the Bay Area, along with national partnerships such as the Links project with the National Urban League and the National Council of La Raza and WestEd's partnership with the research center at Johns Hopkins. (3) Language and cultural diversity is a strong theme in the WestEd's region and is an identified initiative area. WestEd originally planned to focus strongly on this topic.

WestEd has been deeply engaged in assessment and accountability and setting standards. Western Assessment Collaborative (WAC) is a good example of WestEd's effort in accomplishing the goal of specialty area development. As indicated in the WAC report (Signature Program #1), "WAC began at WestEd as a research and development project exploring strategies for supporting standards-based reform and whole school change" (WAC, Signature 1, p. 1). WAC project involves a long-term research and development project

partnership involving both districts and school. The program also calls for designing and implementing a series of seminars and designing and supporting Facilitator Networks and Support Provider Partnership.

I reviewed the materials in the Signature 1 Program, *The Western Assessment Collaborative*. I also participated in the WestEd presentation of WAC and had interaction with the project staff. Based on what I learned from these sources, I think the program has been a success. The clients (representatives of State Department of Education and parents) were all very supportive of the project.

Areas of needed improvement

Some of the proposed activities were not accomplished as planned. For example, the *Johns Hopkins University's model*, *Success for All* and *Roots and Wings* projects were not implemented. WestEd indicated that the main reason for not performing the *Success for All* model and *Roots and Wing* projects was the lack of interest and cooperation from the WestEd partners.

In the area of language and cultural diversity that is one of the main focuses of WestEd, more work needs to be done. Staff members who are working in the area of language and cultural diversity discussed several plans for the research in the near future. However, discussions on the current research on these issues were limited.

Recommendations for improvement

Issues concerning instruction and assessment of linguistically and culturally diverse students are important and must be properly addressed. Research is needed to examine factors affecting instruction and assessment of such students. The use of accommodation in assessment of English language learners (ELLs) is widespread. However, research must determine the

validity of such accommodation. It is imperative to examine the validity of such accommodation to make sure students not receiving accommodations are not negatively impacted.

Another issue related to assessment and instruction of English language learners is measurement of students' level of language proficiency. Most of the commonly used language proficiency tests suffer from technical problems. Research is needed to examine the content and psychometric characteristics of such test and to suggest ways to improve the content and psychometric quality of these tests.

The use of standardized achievement tests on English language learners particularly students with limited English proficiency is another area of concern for this population. Standard achievement tests are prepared and formed based on native English speaker population. Thus, validity of scores of standardized achievement tests for English language learners is questionable. Research is needed to shed light into such issues.

WestEd must conduct more scientifically designed studies to examine the effects of students' language background on their performance, particularly in the content-based areas such as math and science.

B. To what extent is the REL using a self-monitoring process to plan and adapt activities in response to feedback and customer needs?

Strengths

As explained in the previous sections, members of the WestEd Governing Board are committed and knowledgeable. They oversee the WestEd's plans and activities. The Governing Board has a very close relationship with the administrative body of WestEd and they have interactions with each other. This interaction results in effective strategies for dealing with the important issues.

Areas of needed improvement and recommendations

It is necessary to reexamine the structure of the Governing Board to make sure that a balanced representation of members with relevant background exists. Having done that, then WestEd must try to establish a new system or modify the existing systems to have a more objective self-monitoring system. This objective self-monitoring system must be build based on WestEd's organizational foundation.

III. Quality

To what extent is the REL developing high quality products and services?

Strengths

As indicated earlier, the *Nevada State Strategy program* (Signature Work 1) and the *Western Assessment Collaborative* are example of WestEd's high quality products. The Nevada State Education Office representatives and the clients all spoke very highly of the programs. Other products and reports prepared by WestEd are also of high quality.

Areas of needed improvement and recommendations

The psychometric characteristics of assessment system in the Signature works must be improved. Particular attention must be paid to performance indicators. Assessment systems that are not psychometrically sound may not produce valid results. Results of such evaluation may differ across groups of students.

WestEd should also try to disseminate the results of research through refereed journals. By doing this, WestEd increase the pool of its audience and receive constructive feedback from the article reviewers.

IV. Utility

A. To what extent are the products and services provided by the Laboratory useful to and used by customers?

Strengths

The clients and state school officials all indicated that the WestEd products were applicable and useful. Testimonial evidence indicated that programs such as the Nevada State strategy Program are useful for their students. Clients also believe that the materials on WestEd's Web site are very useful.

Areas of needed improvement and recommendations

It is extremely important to know how the end-users feel about the efficiency, applicability, and usefulness of WestEd products. Therefore, it would be very helpful to establish an objective evaluation system to get the end-users' feedback and suggestions. It is also imperative to establish a more psychometrically sound methods of measuring students' achievement particularly on the performance-based measures.

B. To what extent is the REL focused on customer needs?

Strengths

The Board members and the WestEd team are sensitive to clients' need and clients' needs are among their highest priority. The clients' testimony and their level of support of WestEd clearly indicated that clients' are an important part in WestEd's program. The two signature works are indicative of level of responsiveness of WestEd to clients' needs.

Areas of needed improvement and recommendations

An objective evaluation system of clients' needs must be established. A more representative range of clients must be contacted and must be asked for their input to the level of

usefulness of the WestEd program and products. This evaluation should be done systematically and the results should be made available to the clients.

V. Outcomes and Impact

A. To what extent is the REL's work contributing to improved student success, particularly in intensive implementation sites?

Strengths

In both signature works (The *Nevada State Strategy* and the *Western Assessment Collaborative*) and in other documents that I review, there are examples of attention to a comprehensive and valid student assessment system. The importance of using multiple indicators for valid assessment of students' academic progress is emphasized. The documents show a clear understanding of the complex nature of assessment in school.

Areas of needed improvement and recommendations

For student assessment, emphases is on a more comprehensive assessment and the use of performance assessment rather than the traditional multiple-choice norm-referenced tests. While this is a great idea, it introduces another sources of complexity to the student assessment system. Thus, it needs special attention to psychometrics issues of these types of assessments. Most of classical measurement techniques are created based on the norm-referenced test and they work under the classical close-ended question format. The complexity inherent in performance-based assessment requires complex measurement techniques and tools. WestEd's staff responsible for this assessment should pay more attention to these issues.

B. To what extent does the Laboratory assist states and localities to implement comprehensive school improvement strategies?

Strengths

The testimonial data are all indicative of an excellent relationship with the state, district, and schools. Further, the signature works, particularly the Nevada State Strategy suggest that WestEd has been very successful in its relationship with the states and localities that under WestEd's responsibility. WestEd has helped school district to focus on the issues of assessment and to introduce innovative changes on their assessment of their students.

Areas of needed improvement and recommendations

In order to plan for future programs in the four states, WestEd needs to have knowledge of the level of impact of the programs. This would help to modify the programs that are not as effective as others. This will also help to identify programs that are effective and can be recommended for other places.

C. To what extent has the REL made progress in establishing a regional and national reputation in its specialty area?

Strengths

The testimonial evidence suggests that WestEd has excellent reputation in the four states that it is involved. Contact from other states and request for WestEd's help is a good indication of WestEd's excellent reputation in the nation.

Areas of needed improvement and recommendations

There are some areas that WestEd needs to spend more efforts. Issues concerning linguistically and culturally diverse (LCD) students are among them. WestEd should become a leader in this area since one of its major focus in on the LCD students.

Another area that needs improvement is publication in refereed journals. That would definitely add to the visibility aspect of WestEd.

VI. Overall Evaluation of Total Laboratory Programs, Products and Services

The ongoing research and development activities are consistent with both the WestEd's missions and the OERI's objectives. There are sufficient interactions between the WestEd's staff and the members of the Governing Board. Members of the Governing Board are knowledgeable and they have the appropriate background to deal with the issues that are the main focus of WestEd's mission. The Governing Board oversees the activities and provides helpful guidance and suggestions for the WestEd's staff. The physical environment is good and staff is knowledgeable and seems to be very interested in their work.

Research reports and papers and products that are produced by WestEd are of high quality and are useful for the clients. Testimonial evidence suggested that the clients are pleased with the WestEd's products and performance. The evidence also suggests that the clients are enthusiastically looking for a long-term relationship with WestEd.

VII. Broad Summary of Strengths, Areas for Improvement, and Strategies for Improvement

Quality of products and clients' satisfaction are among the highlights of strengths of WestEd. As indicated earlier in this report, the state education authorities from the four states that are served by WestEd praised WestEd for helping them to achieve a higher quality education for all children. However, there are still some needs for improvements. In this part of the report, I focus my comments/recommendation in three areas: (1) improvements toward having more

objective and more psychometrically sound assessment and evaluation system of students' performance, (2) more research and development in the area of instruction and assessment for linguistically and culturally diverse students, and (3) more in-dept and more objective evaluation of end-users' needs.

Objective and Psychometrically Sound Student Evaluation System

A more comprehensive and more valid assessment system usually includes multiple indicators and a combination of traditional paper-and-pencil multiple choice tests along with performance-based measures. Due to the complex nature of such comprehensive assessments, the technical quality of these assessments has been of concern for measurement specialists. Therefore, special attention should be paid on the reliability, validity, and objectivity of such assessments. Measurement theories and statistical approaches that have been created and have been used in traditional multiple-choice testing may not apply for the complex performance-based assessments. It is therefore imperative to use appropriate measurement theories and statistical techniques when developing such assessments. WestEd has developed a relatively complex assessment system that uses multiple indicators and performance assessments. I strongly recommend that more studies be done on the validation of these assessments.

Research and Development in the Area of Instruction and Assessment for Linguistically and Culturally Diverse Students.

Recent federal and state legislation, including the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), through the enactment of the Improving America's Schools Act (IASA) of 1994, now state that *all* children including students with limited English proficiency should be given educational experiences to assist them in achieving high standards.

To increase inclusion of LEP students, these students are usually provided with some

forms of accommodations. However, there are many important issues involved in accommodations for these students. Among the most important issues on the use of accommodation for LEP students are: (1) feasibility (i.e., how practical and feasible are the accommodation), (2) validity, (i.e., do accommodations impact the construct under measurement), and (3) the impact of students background factors including their language background on the effectiveness of accommodations. These are all very important issues in the assessment of linguistically and culturally diverse students. Unfortunately, the literature is scarce in these important areas. WestEd, should, at the extent possible, provide leadership in the research that deals with these issues.

Issues concerning validity of existing language proficiency tests for LEP students and bilingual instructions are among the issues that WestEd should focus it efforts.

More In-depth and More Objective Evaluation of End-Users' Needs.

The ultimate goal for any organization dealing with education is to reach the actual clients, the end-users. This group consists of students, teachers, parents, and school officials. The most straightforward approach in assessing the effectiveness of the efforts/products is to ask the end-users for their direct and objective input. This type of evaluation is complex and could be influenced by many different factors. These factors should be controlled. A well-designed evaluation system may provide useful feedback for researchers who are responsible for research and development in this area. First, the end-user population must be defined, confounding factors and limitations must be specified, and then an evaluation system must be developed. My observation indicates that the end-user has high priority for WestEd, but an objective system of evaluation may not be in place yet.